The Corsair, Byron's silliest poem

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John Cam Hobhouse thought that the two finest works of his friend Byron were *The Corsair*, and *Childe Harold* IV: sure sign of his poor literary judgement, for *The Corsair* is, with *Lara*, one of the most incoherent and ill-focussed of Byron's narrative poems. One would like to know how many of the ten thousand people who bought it on its first day of issue read it more than twice.

Conrad's covert homosexuality is planted discreetly as he disembarks in Canto I:

> They watch his glance with many a stealing look,
> To gather how that eye the tidings took;
> But, this as if he guessed, with head aside,
> Perchance from some emotion – doubt, or pride,
> He read the scroll – "My tablets, Juan – hark –
> Where is Gonsalvo?"
> In the anchored bark."
> "There let him stay – to him this order bear.
> Back to your duty – for my course prepare:
> Myself this enterprize to-night will share."

We are curious. What is the importance to him of Gonsalvo, that it should be Gonsalvo for whom he first asks on landing? Perhaps he feels a paternal interest in him. Perhaps they have a master-pupil relationship. He has a mistress, too, Medora, meek, malleable and musical; but he doesn't ask for her first. No sooner does he enter their abode than he announces that he's got to depart. It really is a Groucho Marx situation: "Hello, I must be going."

> "… I cease to love thee when I love mankind;
> Yet dread not this – the proof of all the past
> Assures the future that my love will last;
> But – oh, Medora! nerve thy gentler heart;
> This hour again – but not for long – we part."

It's never made clear why his expedition to attack Seyd's stronghold can't wait until the next day. We never know what's in the Greek spy's letter which he's given at line 143, and reads at line 153. But it makes for a dramatic and sentimental farewell scene. Medora speaks:

> "This hour we part! – my heart foreboded this;
> Thus ever fade my fairy dreams of bliss –
> This hour – it cannot be – this hour away!
> Yon bark hath hardly anchored in the bay.
> Her consort still is absent, and her crew
> Have need of rest before they toil anew;
> My love! thou mock'st my weakness; and wouldst steel
> My breast before the time when it must feel;
> But trifle now no more with my distress,
> Such mirth hath less of play than bitterness."

Is there really no time for the cuddle she's been months waiting for? Our suspicion is that he's not the kind of man who gives cuddles to women. As he sails away, we hear again of young Gonsalvo:

> They gain the vessel – on the deck he stands.
> Shrieks the shrill whistle – ply the busy hands –
> He marks how well the ship her helm obeys,
> How gallant all her crew – and deigns to praise.

His eyes of pride to young Gonsalvo turn;
Why doth he start, and inly seem to mourn?
Alas! those eyes beheld his rocky tower,
And live a moment o'er the parting hour;
She – his Medora – did she mark the prow?
Ah! never loved he half so much as now!
But much must yet be done ere dawn of day –
Again he mans himself and turns away;
Down to the cabin with Gonsalvo bends,
And there unfolds his plan, his means, and ends …

"… never loved he half so much as now"? Who is it that he loves? Medora? Gonsalvo? Both? We never find out; but wonder what he does, "bending" with young Gonsalvo, and what "unfolding his ends" involves. For the fourth and last reference to young Gonsalvo, see line 1627, quoted below.

Conrad seems to me a prey to the self-destructive instinct in a big way. Not only is he a huge bluffer as heterosexual; he now leads his men into an obvious trap with maximum *élan*, and when captured fights like mad against all attempts to free him. In Canto Two he infiltrates his enemy's stronghold, disguised as a dervish, or wandering Islamic holy man: why? the stronghold has been reconnoitred already. I think he goes in with a view to being captured and his force defeated. One of the early reviewers agreed:

> Conrad … seems to have less judgment than courage; for he disguises himself, for no apparent reason, as a dervise, and presents himself at the pacha's palace, where he is introduced to, and questioned by, Seyd. He represents himself as having been taken prisoner by the pirates, and conveyed to their isle, whence he has made his escape. Before the pacha has finished his questions, the pirates have begun their work of destruction, and the flames from the fleet are seen by the pacha, whose suspicions, most naturally, fall upon the dervise, whom he orders instantly to be put to death.
>
> Conrad now throws off his disguise, and appearing 'clad in complete steel' brandishes his sword, and deals destruction on his foes, as if resolved to sell most dearly that life which he had so needlessly, and so foolishly, exposed (*AntiJacobin Review*, March 1814, p. 227: *The Romantics Reviewed*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, Garland 1972, I 45).

In Canto III, chained to a wall in a dungeon, he is visited by Gulnare, the odalisque whom he has saved from the burning seraglio, and who has fallen for him.

She offers him escape (he is going to be impaled on the morrow); but he refuses – he says he deserves death!

"Thou must die!
Yes, thou must die – there is but one resource,
The last – the worst – if torture were not worse."

"Lady! I look to none; my lips proclaim
What last proclaimed they – Conrad still the same;
Why shouldst thou seek an outlaw's life to spare,
And change the sentence I deserve to bear?
Well have I earned – nor here alone – the meed
Of Seyd's revenge, by many a lawless deed."

Gulnare, who makes no reference to the self-evident fatuity of this position, disappears to the bedroom of her hated lord and master. *The AntiJacobin* reviewer takes up the story:

> He [*Conrad*] follows her, and, after wandering about the tower, reaches a gallery, where, at length, he meets Gulnare, and, on seeing a drop of blood which her hand has left on her forehead, he betrays as much horror as Lady Macbeth with her "out, damned spot!" In short, the most pure, the most virtuous, the most innocent heart, would not manifest more symptoms of abhorrence at a deed of blood, than does this pirate, whose life has been devoted to acts of violence, rapine, plunder, and death, at the spot of blood on Gulnare's forehead.
>
> To us, we confess, the fastidiousness, the reluctance, the scruple, displayed by Conrad, to take the life of a man who has doomed him to the most cruel death; and his subsequent horror at Gulnare's conduct, appear inconsistent with his general character. The man who could harbour such feelings as are assigned to Conrad on this occasion, could not, we think, lead the life which Conrad has led, or act as Conrad has acted (*AntiJacobin Review*, March 1814, p. 232: *The Romantics Reviewed*, I 47).

The "most cruel death" of impalement would involve a large wooden pole being shoved up his bottom – perhaps he anticipates such a thing with pleasure? Here is the moment which shows his fastidiousness and reluctance most clearly:

They meet – upon her brow – unknown, forgot –
Her hurrying hand had left – 'twas but a spot –
Its hue was all he saw, and scarce withstood –
Oh! slight but certain pledge of crime – 'tis blood!

10.

He had seen battle – he had brooded lone
O'er promised pangs to sentenced guilt foreshown –
He had been tempted – chastened – and the chain
Yet on his arms might ever there remain –
But ne'er from strife, captivity, remorse –
From all his feelings in their inmost force –
So thrilled, so shuddered every creeping vein
As now they froze before that purple stain.
That spot of blood, that light but guilty streak,
Had banished all the beauty from her cheek!
Blood he had viewed – could view unmoved – but then
It flowed in combat, or was shed by men!

Did ever an authentic pirate react to bloodshed so wimpishly? He finds Gulnare ten times more scarey than we do:

How much had Conrad's memory to review!
Sunk he in contemplation, till the cape
Where last he anchored reared its giant shape.
Ah! – since that fatal night, though brief the time,
Had swept an age of terror, grief, and crime.
As its far shadow frowned above the mast,
He veiled his face, and sorrowed as he passed;
He thought of all – Gonsalvo and his band,

His fleeting triumph and his failing hand;
He thought on her afar, his lonely bride:
He turned and saw – Gulnare, the homicide! 1630

But is he not a homicide himself? Has he really been a pirate all this time, and never killed anyone? Another early reviewer agreed:

> We think … that his abhorrence of Gulnare for this act [*killing Seyd*] certainly not a feminine one, but yet a terrible proof of sincerity, is not consistent with his character nor perhaps with nature. We can scarcely abhor the crime that is heroically perpetrated for our own deliverance (*Universal Magazine*, February 1814, p. 134-5: *The Romantics Reviewed*, V 2317-18).

Conrad is, we are constantly assured, a bad man. It would be hard to be a corsair[1] and stay virtuous; but Byron catalogues no specific wicked things that he's done, to justify the poem's last three famous words, "… a thousand crimes". It's not just that the poet is having his cake and eating it: he's writing so fast and with so scant a regard for consistency and conviction that he doesn't think. It shows a contempt for his readership which we often see Byron expressing: on January 10th 1815, a week after his wedding, he writes to Thomas Moore:

> ... Now is *your* time; ... I have tired the rascals (i.e. the public) with my Harrys and Larrys, Pilgrims and Pirates. Nobody but S<outhe>y has done any thing worth a slice of bookseller's pudding; and he has not luck enough to be found out in doing a good thing. Now, Tom, is thy time ... (BLJ IV 252-3)

It was the *Edinburgh Review* which put it best:

> … the character of the hero is needlessly loaded in the description with crimes and vices of which his conduct affords no indication. He is spoken of as an abandoned and unfeeling ruffian – and he uniformly comports himself as a perfect pattern of tenderness and humanity. Nay, he even carries his generosity a good deal farther than, we believe, the most moral of his readers would think necessary – for our own part, at least, we do not hesitate to profess that we should have very little scruple about taking the life of any worthy gentleman over night, who had put every thing in order for impaling us in the morning (*Edinburgh Review*, April 1814, p. 220: *The Romantics Reviewed*, II 859).

Byron may have been embarrassed by the inconsistent way in which he had portrayed his Corsair; perhaps he read the *AntiJacobin* and the *Edinburgh*, and their criticisms may have made him add the long notes about Archbishop Blackbourne and Jean La Fitte which he added to the eighth edition, and other, shorter notes which he added to later editions. But these notes (except the one on Blackbourne, which proves nothing at all) only demonstrate that tough men on the seas often show that they have conscience and charisma – not that they are closet gays with deep-lying urges to kill themselves.

1: Conrad isn't a corsair: a corsair had a license from his government to raid enemy shipping. Thus Drake was a corsair. Conrad serves no government, and is therefore a pirate.